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SUBJECT: SELIGER-2009 IN RUSSIAN "YEAR OF YOUTH" STRESSES  
NATIONALISM OVER INNOVATION

REF: 08 MOSCOW 2170

1. (SBU) Summary: Seliger-2009, the highly visible Russian government-run summer camp for young adults, has come to a close. This is the first year that Seliger has not been operated directly by the nationalist youth group "Nashi." However, during the first week of August the official youth wing of United Russia, Molodaya Gvardia (Young Guard), conducted its own camp, taking up where Nashi left off on promoting greater nationalism among Russia's youth. While likely marginal in their real impact on the average young person in Russia, these youth camps play an important role in publicly mobilizing relatively small numbers of politically-active youth in a largely apathetic population. End Summary.

The &Year of Youth8  
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2. (SBU) In September 2008, Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev proclaimed 2009 the "Year of Youth," a year dedicated to developing "creative, scientific and professional young people" on the cutting edge of a new "socio-economic transformation" in Russia. The "Year of Youth" is the most recent in a string of initiatives intended to deal with Russia's growing health, societal and demographic problems. However, embedded in this rhetoric is the government's belief that Russia's youth today are not getting the "proper patriotic upbringing which instills civic initiative" necessary to start this transformation. President Medvedev asked the State Duma to divert "all necessary resources" towards funding initiatives that promote such patriotism and civic duty, the most visible of which has been the summer camp Seliger-2009.

Seliger-2009: A Break with the Past?  
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3. (SBU) Seliger is a summer camp located on the banks of Lake Seliger in the Tver Region, 200 miles northwest of Moscow. Until this year, the summer camp at Seliger was funded and operated by the nationalist youth group "Nashi," an organization generally recognized as aggressively nationalistic and under the thumb of the Kremlin. In contrast to previous years, Seliger-2009 was "transformed" to fit with the theme of the "Year of Youth" and is now funded by the Federal Ministry of Sport, Tourism and Youth, rather than through direct Nashi sponsorship. Seliger-2009 was marketed as an innovation forum rather than a patriotic, nationalistic summer camp. (Note: in 2008, Seliger was also marketed as an "innovation forum," but remained a Nashi-sponsored event. 2008 saw the lowest number of attendees since the camp's inception in 2004. End note.) From the beginning of July until early August, the camp conducted a series of week-long modules which included themes on leadership, volunteerism, business, and even a course on

tolerance of other nationalities entitled "Russia for Everyone." The Ministry of Sport, Tourism and Youth estimated that over thirty thousand young adults visited Seliger by the time it closed August 10, roughly four times the number of attendees in previous years.

14. (SBU) Prime Minister Putin visited the camp July 27 to hear what Russia's most promising young people had come up with throughout the month. This visit was intended to showcase the "innovative" nature of the camp and pledge the government's support for such "educational venues even in an economic crisis." While there, Putin heard from several students who presented projects varying from alternative energy projects in the Mongolian desert to proposals for new cheaper engine sealants, and he lauded participants for being on the front lines in tackling key problems confronting Russian society, including the "fight against corruption." (Note: Kommersant reported that the Chairman of the Federal Agency for Youth Issues and former Nashi head Vasiliy Yakemyenko counseled young "innovators" ahead of the visit against using certain "forbidden" words when speaking with the Prime Minister, including "Medvedev, money, President, state order, falling to pieces, depressive, bad, give me, and help." End note.) Medvedev also addressed camp participants via video-link, focusing on need for youth to play a more active role in developing Russia's future innovative economy.

15. (SBU) The innovation focus at Seliger ended the last week of July, but the religious component of the summer camp continued until early August. This part of the camp is the result of direct collaboration between the Russian Orthodox Church and Nashi's religious wing, and during this week some

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six hundred Orthodox youth from throughout Russia and the CIS attended. According to the leader of Nashi's religious wing Boris Yakemyenko (brother of Vasiliy Yakemyenko), youth issues are not simply the responsibility of the state. They are "problems for both Church and state," working together in order to make a brighter future for Russia's children. This is the first time that such a religious camp has been offered at Seliger, although in 2008 ROC officials were deeply involved in the Nashi proceedings (Reftel).

The "Year of Youth:" Simply a Ploy?

16. (SBU) While polls show that many Russians agree that social problems, such as rampant alcoholism and declining population, must be dealt with decisively by reaching out to Russia's youth, many also argue that the government's recent initiative and the entire "Year of Youth" are not serious. An expert on youth issues, when asked what this year's initiative in general, and Seliger-2009 in particular, were supposed to accomplish, told us "they do not mean anything. It is simply a facade." According to the expert, a top United Russia official declared to him - in all seriousness - that Seliger-2009 was conceived not as a forum simply for young people and their futures, but to deal with "corruption in the regions" and, at the same time, to maintain the Moscow-dominated power vertical during difficult economic times. Each student was to come up with a project, and at the end of the forum, some of these projects would be "endorsed" by United Russia officials. In this way, the camp was to stimulate both the minds of young people and provide new ideas to local governments throughout Russia, though the likelihood of implementing these projects is questionable.

17. (SBU) This year's move to bring the Seliger camp under the direct control and supervision of the Ministry of Sport, Youth and Tourism was also criticized by several members of the Russian political establishment. "Solidarity" opposition leader Iliya Yashin claimed that Seliger-2009 was simply a way to funnel more state money towards the Nashi cause. He argued that the ties between Nashi, the camp and those responsible for the "Year of Youth" in general remain too

strong, as the former head of Nashi, Boris Yakemyenko, now heads the Agency for Youth Issues, which is closely connected with the funding Ministry.

#### Diffusion of United Russia,s Youth Group Movement?

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¶8. (SBU) The "nationalization" of the annual Nashi camp at Seliger and its move towards less of a politics-dominated program in Seliger-2009, points to a diversification of the government-sponsored youth movements in Russia. Nashi's continued involvement in Seliger and the government,s wish that Seliger attract a broader range of young entrepreneurs has created a parallel trend in the youth movement. Several youth groups associated with United Russia, such as Molodaya Gvardia (Young Guard, the official youth wing of United Russia), have taken the role that Nashi formerly occupied as promoters of nationalism among Russia's youth.

¶9. (SBU) Molodaya Gvardia conducted its own summer camp, called "Gvardia-2020," from August 3-10. Taking place in the rural Lipensk region 400 miles southeast of Moscow, camp leaders claimed that over 1000 young people from all over Russia attended. Throughout the week, topics for participant discussion included "Russia\*it,s Me!" and "I am an agent of the Kremlin." The format and focus at this camp paralleled Nashi gatherings in past years. While such nationalistic topics were downplayed at this year's Seliger-2009, youth groups such as Molodaya Gvardia filled the nationalism gap for pro-government, politically-active Russian youth.

#### Comment

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¶10. (SBU) There is little reason to celebrate the transformation of Seliger from a Nashi training ground to a camp more focused on "innovation." Kremlin-supported youth groups and activities like Seliger-2009 and Gvardia 2020, and the extensive coverage in state-run media they receive, continued to influence the direction and content of activities conducted during the "Year of Youth." The motivation of promoting Russia's image remains key; even Seliger,s "tolerance" program preached the need for tolerance so that Russia will "become a greater power like the United States." The intimate political connections between the government, nationalist circles and youth groups

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mean that the "Year of Youth" likely will yield less toward its professed objective of dealing with the major issues facing youth in Russia today, while instead promoting the objectives of individuals and groups wedded to more narrowly-minded approaches to current challenges.  
RUBIN